

**Media Facilitation of American Political Effectiveness:
The Construction of Issue-Based Vote Choice**

By

Kristine M. O'Toole
B.A., Ohio University, 1998

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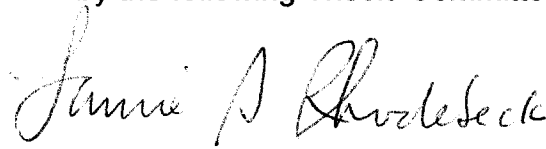
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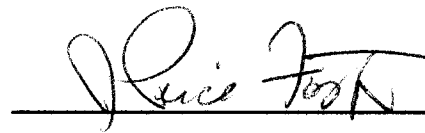
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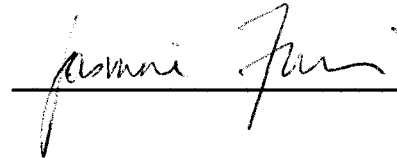
November 13, 2003

by the following Thesis Committee:



Thesis Director





DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to two exceptional people.
My brother, Sgt. Crawford A. Leonard, whose strength is
unparalleled among those whose freedom he defends.

Come home to us safely.

My nephew, Sean Leonard, who has learned by the age of
ten to have more perseverance than most of us learn in a lifetime.

Enjoy your wonderful life.

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To my parents, there are not enough words to express my gratitude. Your unconditional love, support and encouragement have led me to where I am today. Finally, Matthew, your infinite patience and boundless wisdom have encouraged me to achieve success in ways you could never realize. Thank you.

ABSTRACT

MEDIA FACILITATION OF AMERICAN POLITICAL EFFECTIVENESS: THE CONSTRUCTION OF ISSUE-BASED VOTE CHOICE

Kristine M. O'Toole

December 18, 2003

Conflicting theories have surrounded the issue of media effects on voter behavior. This thesis is an examination of the role played by the media in the construction of issue-based vote choices in presidential elections. Statistical data for this project have been gathered from the 1996 National Election Studies Survey. The research utilizes regression analysis in order to demonstrate that television and newspaper do not facilitate the development of accurate candidate perceptions among voters.

Findings indicate that media use does not significantly influence the accuracy of voters' perceptions of candidate issue positions. In addition, both accurate and inaccurate perceptions are found to be considered when voters make political decisions. Since the media are widely accepted as a dependable source of useful political information, the results suggest that American principles of democracy are at risk of being compromised by ineffective channels of communication between the electorate and the political arena.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

		PAGE
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS		iv
ABSTRACT.....		v
LIST OF TABLES.....		ix
 CHAPTER		
I.	INTRODUCTION	1
	Media Influence in Relation to Accuracy.....	3
	Project Structure.....	5
II.	LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
	Theory of Minimal Media Effect.....	8
	Theory of Substantial Media Effect.....	10
	Overview of Historical Research	14
III.	HYPOTHESES & METHODOLOGY	19
	Hypotheses	19
	Issue Accuracy	20
	Issue Voting.....	21
	Unawareness of Issue Inaccuracy.....	22
	Methodology.....	23
	Data.....	23
	Issue Accuracy Analysis: Dependent Variable	25
	Issue Accuracy Analysis: Independent Variables ...	28

	Issue Accuracy Analysis: Control Variables	30
	Issue Accuracy: Regression Analyses.....	33
	Issue Voting Analysis: Dependent Variable.....	34
	Issue Voting Analysis: Independent Variables.....	35
	Issue Voting Analysis: Control Variables	37
	Issue Voting: Logistic Regression Analyses	38
IV.	PHASE I ANALYSIS.....	41
	Issue Accuracy Analysis.....	41
	Insignificant: Frequency of Media Use and Attention Paid to Campaigns	42
	Significant: Education, General Level of Information and Race	46
	Discussion: Implications of Issue Accuracy	49
	Discussion: Demographics	50
	Discussion: Media Use	53
V.	PHASE II ANALYSIS.....	56
	Issue Based Vote Choice Analysis.....	56
	Significant: Issue Distance and Party Identification	56
	Insignificant: Race, Gender, Income and Age	58
	Function of the Interactive Term.....	61
	Discussion: Implications of Issue-Based Vote Choice	62
	Discussion: Implications of the Interactive Term	63

	Discussion: Implications of Media Impact.....	64
VI.	SUMMARY.....	66
	Conclusion.....	66
	Consequences: Overall Results	67
	Further Research Opportunities	71
	REFERENCES.....	73
	CURRUCULUM VITAE	76

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	PAGE
1. Summary of Media Use Variables.....	30
2. Impact of Media Use on Accuracy of Issue Perceptions.....	43
3. Impact of Campaign Attention on Accuracy of Issue Perceptions.....	44
4. Impact of Media Use and Campaign Attention on Accuracy of Issue Perceptions.....	46
5. Impact of Issue Distance Perceptions on Presidential Vote Choice.....	58

Chapter I

Introduction

In the United States, elections serve as the tool with which the American electorate is able to hold public officials accountable. The democratic processes that make up the American political system allow citizens to express the expectations they have for their public representatives. They also serve as the most powerful avenue of recourse with which voters can convey approval or disapproval of the performance of government officials. By using the power of vote choice as leverage, citizens of the United States have the ability to enforce the responsibilities of elected representatives. If these delegates are unresponsive to the needs and concerns of constituents, their likelihood of re-election is jeopardized. Therefore, elections in the United States are the most compelling mechanism with which the general public exercises its right to self-rule.

The growth of the United States, in both land mass and population, has considerably altered the manner in which the political arena operates. Citizens rarely have direct interaction with the system itself. Elections are an opportunity for voters to personally participate in the electoral process in a way that most people do not experience on a daily basis. Because the electorate is quite removed from regular interaction with the political arena, an intermediary

connection to it is necessary. Without some type of link between the political arena and the general public, citizens would be left without a source of relevant political knowledge. It is precisely this source that allows citizens to feel informed about politics and as if they have the ability to make accurate decisions concerning candidates and issues.

Throughout history, technological changes have continually modified the ways in which people have collected information about politics. As a result, there have been various techniques utilized as means toward sharing and gathering political knowledge. Currently, the most commonly visible instruments are television and newspaper. Both television and newspaper are widely circulated methods of accessing information in the United States. The general public has become increasingly reliant upon them as trustworthy sources of substantive information. Television and newspaper have become widely accepted as suitable suppliers of instructive facts upon which to build accurate political decisions. This trend has made television and newspaper very powerful forces within the realm of political democracy in the United States. It has empowered media vehicles such as television and newspaper with the ability to considerably influence the political arena and the effectiveness of its processes.

However, a debate has developed around the issue of media effects. Many researchers have concluded that the media exert little impact on political decision making. Others have claimed that the media have a meaningful effect on political choices made by citizens in the United States. The argument between these conflicting ideas has endured for a number of years. A variety of

techniques have been developed to study media effects but these contradictory claims persist nonetheless. The debate is further fueled by the differences in the methods of study that have been adopted by researchers. Since the inquiry into media effects has been approached from very diverse techniques, the conclusions reflect a range of findings. Even among researchers who believe that the media have a significant impact on political attitudes, there are distinctions between the constructions of their arguments. Some propose that media influences do nothing beyond bringing issues into consideration when making political decisions. Others may suggest, however, that media influences have such an extensive effect so as to actively shape citizens' views on the issues themselves.

Media Influence in Relation to Accuracy

An unexplored aspect of media influence involves investigating whether television and newspaper contribute to the development of accurate political perceptions among American voters. Since television and newspaper are commonly accessed mechanisms of information gathering, it is useful to observe the relationship they have with accuracy. Many voters utilize television news broadcasts and newspaper articles as informative tools that link them to the political realm. It is important to assess how information conveyed through television and newspaper is utilized by voters because, in American society, there is a general recognition of both as dependable sources of truthful, unbiased reporting. If voters who gain political information through television and

newspaper believe it to be accurate, it can logically be deduced that such knowledge will be included in their decision making processes. There is, however, a crucial consequence that must not be ignored. Voters who collect political knowledge through media channels will be unable to objectively determine whether their resulting political perceptions are accurate or inaccurate. The danger in this is that a multitude of *inaccurate*, as well as accurate, perceptions may become a component in political decisions made by American voters.

The utilization of inaccurate political perceptions by voters as if they are accurate can be detrimental to the fundamental objectives of democracy in the United States. Democratic procedures in the United States are implemented on the grounds of providing the citizenry with an avenue of expression and self-rule. There is an established framework that has been established to allow voters to carry out democratic practices in an efficient manner. As mentioned earlier, elections are the mechanism by which voters are able to exercise these rights. The effectiveness of American democracy is, however, unavoidably shaped by a variety of other factors. One of these factors is the media. Because its presence in contemporary society is inescapable, the media have become inevitably linked to the efficiency of democracy in the United States. The result is that media influence over accuracy of voter perception has become a valuable subject of inquiry. The relationship that exists between media use and the construction of accurate political perceptions among voters, therefore, is central to

understanding whether American democratic processes are as effective as we would like them to be.

Project Structure

The project discussed in the following pages conducts an in-depth examination of how media influences issue-based vote choice in presidential elections. Chapter II will begin with a discussion of the previous literature that has been published on the subject. This includes a thorough overview of the debate between those who defend the theory of minimal media effects and those who corroborate the claim that the media are substantially influential in political decision making. It also describes the shift that has taken place in research pertaining to the subject. This includes an explanation of differing approaches that researchers have taken over time in examining media influence.

Following the review of relevant literature, Chapter III will state the hypotheses upon which the project was built. The hypotheses will be three fold. Each hypothesis will pertain to one of the three primary concerns of the research and collectively, they will generate the framework for the project. Within Chapter III, subsequent to the statement of hypotheses, I will extensively explain the methodology that was employed in the project. The technique includes two phases of analysis that will be explained in detail. The first phase of analysis will discuss the accuracy of respondent perceptions about presidential candidate issue positions and whether accuracy has a significant relationship with media use. The second phase of analysis will discuss the role of issues in vote choice,

generally, as well as the whether particular accuracy levels determine if respondents will be more likely to consider issue distances between themselves and candidates when making vote choices. Each of these discussions will include a description of how the analyses were set up, what was expected of them, and what results were achieved.

The Chapter IV will begin the interpretation of the analyses that were conducted and begin the process of determining what the real life consequences are of the findings. It focuses on the results of the examination of media influence on issue accuracy and establishes whether the expected relationship was revealed. It will determine what the significance levels of the media variables indicate about their role in causing respondents to develop accurate perceptions about the issue positions of presidential candidates. In addition, this chapter will attempt to identify factors other than media usage that demonstrate important relationships with accuracy. Finally, it will discuss the practical implications of the results.

Chapter V will continue the interpretation of analyses. It will focus on the impact of issues on vote choice as well as the interactive effects of issue distance and accuracy of issue perceptions. The significance levels will be observed in order to understand if there is a substantial relationship between issue distance perceptions and vote choice. In addition, Chapter V will determine whether respondents with a particular level of accuracy in their issue distance perceptions are more likely to include the issues in their vote choice decision. Finally, it will also discuss the practical implications of the results.

The concluding section, Chapter VI, will evaluate the results of the project as a whole. It will merge the findings into a comprehensive assessment of media effects, issue accuracy, and voting. It will also discuss whether the outcome corresponded with the expectations of the inquiry. Chapter VI will draw conclusions about individual portions of the project as well as assess its function as an inclusive undertaking. Finally, it will discuss the implications of the project by reflecting on the American democratic system.

Chapter II

Literature Review

There is a variety of literature that examines the effects of the news media on voting behavior in the United States. Scholars have come to conflicting conclusions that reflect the debate surrounding this topic. As Dennis McQuail (1981) pointed out, there are three general types of literature concerning the media's influence on political behavior. The first credits the media with compelling powers of persuasion but typically fails to provide systematic evidence to support this claim. The second assumes a procedural, quantitative approach and regularly finds the effects of media impact to be minimal. The third also follows concise methodological processes but focuses on particular features of media activity. By doing so, the third literature acknowledges that there is an absence of effect overall, but by controlling for specific conditions, contends that the media do produce consequences among specific groups when factors such as education, class and political interest are taken into account.

Theory of Minimal Media Effect

Early researchers have generally concluded that media sources rarely influenced the political attitudes of the general public. Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure (1976) generated one of the original studies of television

influence and found that in almost all aspects, television failed to exert significant influence on political attitudes. Many other researchers such as Sidney Kraus and Dennis Davis (1976) and Dan Nimmo (1978) have published studies that also endorse the “minimal effects” argument.

Michael MacKuen (1981) proposed the argument when he wrote that the public often have delayed reactions to the media and are not significantly affected by media agenda setting. Shanto Iyengar (1979) expressed the high likelihood that the relationship between news broadcasts and the political behavior of viewers is spurious at best. It is noteworthy to acknowledge how the debate around this issue developed by observing how the early research of Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) would have responded to Iyengar’s claim of spuriousness. They pointed out that arguments made on the basis of spuriousness are assuming that political activities are easily accessible to voters through some alternative means. McCombs and Shaw revealed that, in reality, the political arena is very much removed from the daily lives of American voters and their ability to gather information about it is limited. Although their research was conducted and published prior to Iyengar’s, this would have been their criticism of his hypothesis.

Lutz Erbring, Edie Goldenberg, and Arthur Miller (1980) concluded that viewers possess sensitivities to certain issues prior to the influence of media sources and that informal communication dilutes any effect that may have been a possibility in the first place. Their premise is that there is a dynamic, which they label “audience effects,” that interacts with the influence of the media. The

“audience effects” consist of the sensitivities which have already been established among individual viewers based on the viewers’ personal characteristics.

Peter Clarke and Eric Fredin (1978) and Alexis Tan (1980) also made the declaration that media effects are substantially offset by the casual exchange of ideas that takes place among viewers. What is particularly interesting about Tan’s investigation is that she recognized an important relationship between interpersonal discussion of political issues and media use; however, the relationship was not found to be reciprocal. She maintains that interpersonal discussion of political issues, in actuality, leads to increased use of the media to gather more information to facilitate participation in these exchanges. Media use is not, however, a preliminary factor that necessarily instigates interpersonal discussions. The importance of this finding is that it appears to suggest that the impact of the media is overshadowed and severely diminished by other attributes of the voter because interpersonal discussions seem to be related to alternative characteristics of the voter, such as political participation.

Theory of Substantial Media Effect

Throughout the 1980’s and the 1990’s, some academics within the field began to support the hypothesis that the media do affect public opinion. Dennis McQuail (1981) pointed out that part of what has led to this development is the modification of broad-based research that examines the media as a whole into inquiry that controls for certain types of media use, distinctive events and

circumstances as well as the distinctive responses of specific groups of media users. Some early examples of this type of shift were achieved by Robert Erikson (1976), Sidney Hollander (1979), and Howard Scarrow and Steve Borman (1979). Each of these scholars successfully illustrated the individualized effects of newspaper endorsements in their respective studies. David Paletz and Richard Vinegar (1978), Jack MacLeod, Jane Brown, Lee Becker and Dean Ziemke (1977) and Thomas Kazee (1981) demonstrated parallel effects within their analyses of television impact. By exploring the variations that occur among different subgroups of people, they exemplify the general transformation to more localized investigations. Joseph Wagner (1983) also contributed to localized research by comparing newspaper readers with television viewers. His findings consistently revealed significant differences between the political effects of media use on these two subgroups.

Wagner (1983) indicated that given the results of more focused research, it is logical that there has been a second realignment in the concentration of study in this area. Many researchers have shifted their focus toward priming and agenda setting and how these two effects may interact with one another. Both of these effects have become major points of interest because research findings seem to suggest that the media should be studied for their ability to establish which issues media users will perceive as most important, rather than transforming already-held beliefs about the issues. Joanne M. Miller and Jon A. Krosnick (2000) define the notion of priming as the idea that voters, when making political judgments, will place more emphasis on the issues that the media have

given more attention to. Agenda setting refers to the ability of editors, newsroom staff and broadcasters to choose which issues will receive more attention.

Miller and Krosnick (2000) examine the relationship between these two effects, focusing on agenda setting as a mediator of priming. They set out to answer two questions. The first was whether priming occurred more among citizens who were most likely to trust the media. The second was to examine whether level of political knowledge had any significant correlation to priming while controlling for trust in the media. Miller and Krosnick's investigation reinforced conclusions that the media have an effect on public opinion. However, it revealed that priming occurred most often among citizens who were highly informed about political matters and also trusted news sources to report accurately and truthfully. Their argument is that citizens whose judgments are most shaped by the media are those citizens who knowingly accept the media as reliable sources of information and therefore choose to incorporate media coverage into their political evaluations.

As previously mentioned, the early research of McCombs and Shaw (1972) addressed the issues introduced by these later scholars, such as Miller and Krosnick. McCombs and Shaw asserted that the media serve as an effective channel in establishing which issues will be seen as most important by the public and will, therefore be taken into consideration when making political decisions. In their examination of the 1968 presidential campaign, McCombs and Shaw compared the issues perceived as important to voters with the issues covered by the media outlets used by the respondents during the campaign.

They found that the overall perceptions of the respondents corresponded with the issues that the media identified as most important, as measured by the amount of attention given to them. To state it another way, Bernard C. Cohen (1963) seemed to have understood this concept very early in the debate when he said that the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*” (p.13).

In another recent study Marc J. Hetherington (1996) concurred with these theories when he reported that voters’ perceptions of economic indicators can most certainly be shaped by the media. According to Hetherington (1996), “Media consumption and attention to the presidential campaign through the mass media negatively shaped voters’ retrospective economic assessments” (p. 372). Although his supposition is consistent with the conclusions of the abovementioned researchers, he proposed that the impact of the media extends a step further. His claim is that the media actively manipulate voters’ beliefs about issues rather than simply bringing issues to their attention. He offered this theory as an explanation for George Bush’s loss of the presidential election in 1992. Hetherington asserts that despite the presence of an economy that had recovered well before election day, relentless negative reporting by the news media caused voters to form inaccurate and harmful perceptions of economic performance.

Another important discovery was made by Diana Mutz (1994). She addressed the question as to what role personal events play in the formation of

political attitudes and how the media serve as an instrument that allows people to make connections between their own experiences and those of the general public. Her assertion was that media attention given to a particular issue will advance the probability of personal experiences being translated into political preferences. She found media attention to give the voter an opportunity to identify his or her own situation as a component of a broader occurrence rather than as an isolated circumstance. This research offers a useful example of inquiries that focus on the effects of a specific experience, such as unemployment, and how the media's coverage of that phenomenon as a national dilemma is interpreted. Mutz's study appears to have a foundation similar to the previously mentioned research by Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller (1980). The distinguishing element between the two is that Mutz reached the conclusion that the effect of the media on the formation of political ideas is substantial while Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller interpreted their results as an indication that the media do not exert enough independent effect to be considered a significant factor.

Overview of Historical Research

The historical pattern of the literature on the role of the media in shaping public opinion clearly demonstrates a debate that has fluctuated between conflicting claims. The literature has displayed shifts from media being widely recognized as having little, if any, effect on voters' beliefs to being recognized by a substantial number of researchers in the field as it having a principal impact.

The debates have reiterated themselves in a cyclical fashion. The most obvious reasons why this has occurred are the shifts in the focus of how the research is performed. Initial studies of media effects consisted of examining the role of the media as a whole. Specific forms of media were not examined separately for influences each may exert individually. The change took place when researchers began distinguishing between broadcast and print media outlets and gained an appreciation for the different characteristics each possesses and the diversity of effects on political attitudes each may provide.

The second shift in how research in this field is approached has led scholars to examine the media with even more specificity. By devoting more attention to specific issues that receive media coverage, scholars began to address questions of agenda setting and priming. The methods of scrutinizing these effects have varied, and an assortment of theories about the relationships that exist between characteristics of the media and agenda setting and priming have resulted. Some researchers have found agenda setting and priming to correlate with one another in ways that heavily influence political preferences while many others have discounted their influence as secondary to an entire host of other dynamics. Regardless, a large body of research on media effects has begun to recognize the importance of determining whether people tend to place more value, when making political evaluations, on the specific issues that the media emphasize more frequently.

In reviewing the body of literature on this subject, we find many different positions that shed useful insights into what influence the media may or may not

have on how citizens construct their political opinions, but missing evidence on another aspect of political behavior: the degree of accuracy achieved by voters in making issue-based vote choices. An examination of issue voting performed by Stuart Elaine MacDonald, George Rabinowitz and Ola Listhaug (1995) revealed that voters of different degrees of political sophistication implement similar models of rationalization when making political decisions. The discouraging implication of this finding is that better educated and highly engaged voters do not employ decision-making methods that provide them with a more accurate basis upon which to make choices. Another study conducted by Price and Zaller (1993) confirmed that individual levels of political knowledge have considerable impact on an individual's ability to recall media coverage content. Their conclusions indicate that differences among levels of political knowledge give more politically educated audience members an advantage over less politically educated audience members in utilizing news media broadcasts (Price & Zaller, 1993).

The implication of this finding is that respondents are unable to objectively determine whether their perceptions are inaccurate. This exemplifies the value of investigating the degree of accuracy achieved by voters in making issue-based vote choices. Therefore, inquiry into accuracy of voter perceptions deserves attention because it questions whether the media in the United States foster the successful execution of the democratic principles that America aims to achieve. Because the United States has exceeded the scale within which it would be reasonable to expect citizens to gather political information through personal

daily interaction with the political arena, American voters have become increasingly reliant on the media to provide them with the information necessary to make informed choices. This project aspires to determine whether the most commonly accessed media in the United States have successfully achieved this objective.

Previous studies on media effects have not addressed the topic from the perspective adopted here. We have little evidence that voters are receiving useful information from the media channels through which they seek it. Discussions of agenda-setting and priming have focused on specific issues that are covered by television broadcasts and newspaper articles. None, however, have examined the accuracy of voter perceptions that are developed from these media vehicles. The field lacks any effective measurement of what voters believe to be the candidates' positions on issues compared with what the candidates' actual positions are. This is an important aspect of the research that would allow scholars within the field to determine whether voters are making decisions and casting ballots that accurately correspond with their beliefs and intentions.

In order to evaluate the question of accuracy, this project implements many of the practices that have been utilized by previous researchers. It is useful to examine different types of media use individually to reveal the variation in effects that each may have. It is also useful to identify major issues that are considered to be commonly recognized by voters and media alike and use them to determine respondent issue positions and respondent perceptions of

candidate issue positions. By bringing these previously established techniques of looking at media effects to bear on the question of the accuracy of issue-based vote choice, this research can assess the capability of the media to serve as a constructive tool of democracy.

Chapter III

Hypotheses

A variety of factors contribute to vote choice, but for the purposes of this study, the role of the media as a fundamental influence will be analyzed.

Several anticipated outcomes are expected to be produced by this research analysis. The ultimate aspiration of this project is to determine the accuracy of issue-based vote choices cast by American voters in presidential elections.

Media outlets are an undeniable feature of contemporary communication and information gathering. Because television broadcasts and newspaper publications are the most commonly accessed media vehicles, there is a widely-accepted notion that the information conveyed by them can be accepted as precise depictions of the political arena. As a result, media consumers proceed to make political judgments based on information they perceive to be accurate reflections of candidates. The purpose of this research is to examine whether this view of the media as a constructive tool of democracy is a reality or an illusion.

The assumption that voters will possess a higher level of knowledge about the incumbent than an opposing candidate is not inconceivable. Thomas Mann and Raymond Wolfinger (1980) noted that incumbents experience much higher levels of recognition than challengers. They point out that survey respondents

not only have a better ability to identify the names of incumbents over challengers, but they also have higher rates of name recall of incumbents over challengers (Mann & Wolfinger, 1980). The fact that the campaign includes an incumbent presents the interesting dynamic of providing voters with the opportunity to display increased familiarity with at least one of the candidates. The relationship between the media and the electoral process within the United States presidential elections is expected to exhibit an association that would alarm most Americans. The project is based on a series of three hypotheses that will be developed to examine the influence of the media on issue-based vote choices as they are shaped throughout presidential campaigns.

Issue Accuracy

The sheer magnitude of the United States causes voters to depend heavily on the media as an instrument of knowledge and understanding about political matters. The general public has developed a reliance on the intense coverage of presidential elections as their guide to making political judgments. Only a minute percentage of the citizenry experience direct contact with the political arena and therefore, most rely on these intermediary sources to supply them with information. The implication of this practice is that a variety of external and internal pressures can have an influence on media coverage (Ranney, 1983, 114). There is an assortment of approaches adopted in reporting the news. When considering candidate positions on issues, this variety in reporting techniques causes difficulty in drawing distinct conclusions about each

candidate. Therefore, the perceptions that voters have of any one candidate often fluctuate among a broad range of interpretations. This pattern inevitably finds many media consumers making inaccurate judgments about political candidates. The reality of actual candidate positions will reveal that only a portion of the assessments made by voters will be correct. Based on this logical progression of fact, the first hypothesis reads as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Respondents who gain political knowledge about presidential campaigns through the use of national television broadcasts and newspaper publications do not receive adequate, substantive information that significantly increases their ability to accurately perceive the positions of the candidates on issues.

Issue Voting

After establishing the significance of the media in facilitating accurate perceptions of candidate issue positions, the importance of voting based on issues must be considered. Although there are many factors that voters take into account when forming political decisions, particular influences tend to demonstrate stronger impact than others. Party identification has repeatedly been confirmed as the most powerful determinant of vote choice in the United States. However, issues are also expected to play an important role in this analysis. Despite loyal ties to political parties, issues have an independent influence on vote choice (Markus & Converse, 1979). Therefore, when voters perceive their own issue positions as close to or distant from those of a candidate, their vote choices are likely to be affected. A respondent's probability of voting for a particular candidate is expected to be substantially weakened by perceiving her own issue opinions as unlike those of that candidate. Conversely,

a respondent's probability of voting for a particular candidate is expected to be substantially strengthened by perceiving her own issue opinions as like those of that candidate. Therefore, the second hypothesis reads as follows:

Hypothesis 2: Voters are likely to take issues into account when developing political assessments about presidential candidates. Therefore, issue distance perceptions strongly influence vote choices made by American voters in presidential elections.

Unawareness of Issue Inaccuracy

It has been discussed that this investigation expects to discover that the inability of respondents to gain useful knowledge through media vehicles is a consequence of ineffective media coverage. However, consumers of media are often unaware that national television news broadcasts and newspaper publications fail to provide them with useful information. Because American voters are often unaware of this failure on the part of the media, they are lead to believe that their political perceptions are correctly developed based on factual information. The implication of voters being unaware of their own inaccuracy leads to a widespread incidence of citizens casting votes that may not fully correspond with their intentions. Since voters are unaware of the reality of their own level of accuracy (or inaccuracy) in candidate perceptions, more accurate respondents are not expected to be more likely to take issues into account when making political choices than inaccurate respondents. As a result, the third hypothesis reads as follows:

Hypothesis 3: The likelihood of a respondent to take issues into account when making vote choices will not be significantly affected

by the level of accuracy that respondent has in her perceptions of the candidate's issue positions. Therefore, alarming rates of inaccurate perceptions, along with accurate perceptions, will influence vote choices in presidential elections.

Methodology

The methods utilized in the overall examination of media influence on accuracy in issue-based vote choice remain constant throughout its entirety. The data sources are uniform throughout the project and standardized techniques of social science calculation are employed consistently. However, the progression of the inquiry leads the project through several phases of analysis. The first phase of analysis examines respondents' abilities to formulate accurate perceptions of candidate issue positions and whether media influences constructively cultivate such accuracy. These conclusions will be drawn from ordinary least squares regression analyses. The second phase of analysis examines the relationship between issue perceptions and vote choice. These conclusions will be drawn from logistic regression analyses. Although the fundamental methodology remains the same throughout both phases of analysis, variables change so as to speak to the specific purposes of each stage.

Data

This study utilizes data from the 1996 American National Election Study. A codebook compiled by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) provides details on sampling procedure, study design, and question wording. The codebook is accessible in the archives of the ICPSR web

site (<http://www.icpsr.umich.edu>). ICPSR bears no responsibility for the analysis or interpretations presented here.

The use of a national presidential election is most advantageous for this study because of the widely-accepted assumption that they are the most visible elections in the United States. Presidential elections in the United States introduce an interesting element into the democratic process that no other election is able to accomplish – the concept of the nation as a whole having a collective interest in the outcome. Congressional, state and local elections isolate the interests of particular regions. Presidential elections, alternatively, succeed in uniting consciousness across a variety of local populations and unifying them as a common constituency. Because of this shared national interest, media coverage of presidential campaigns and election outcomes is fairly uniform throughout the country. This presence of concentrated public scrutiny makes data on presidential elections more readily accessible and easily obtainable.

There are several reasons that the 1996 presidential election was specifically selected as the focus of this study. First, the election is recent. Examining the 1996 election will allow us to observe media use habits that are relevant to contemporary society. Second, the 1996 presidential election is useful because of the candidate choices. It is beneficial that the election included an incumbent. Finally, the availability of reliable information on the 1996 presidential election as it is provided through the Inter-university Consortium for

Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan supplies a valuable source of evidence that can be utilized to build a solid argument.

The project will focus on the candidates supported by the two major political parties only. President Bill Clinton is the candidate endorsed by the Democratic Party and Robert Dole is the candidate endorsed by the Republican Party. No other candidates listed on the ballot are included in the study because there were no alternative entrants in serious contention with the two front-runners.

Issue Accuracy Analysis: Dependent Variable

This first phase of the project requires the creation of several dependent variables that were not included as direct questions within the survey. The American National Election Study provides no variables that assess the degree of accuracy in issue-based vote choice. Issue accuracy is measured by extracting the appropriate variables and constructing formulas that provide information concerning the accuracy of the respondents' perceptions. To begin with, five issue areas about which respondents answered questions were selected. The five issue areas are: (1) services and spending, (2) defense spending, (3) aid to blacks, (4) abortion and (5) job creation versus environmental concerns. Respondents were asked to place themselves and each of the candidates along an ordinal scale according to their perceptions of issue position taken. The responses to these questions were very useful. However, the project demanded some mathematical computation of the results.

To create a measurement that illustrates the accuracy of the respondents' perceptions of candidate positions, it is necessary to make a reliable determination of the candidate's actual viewpoint on each issue. Tracking public statements made by candidates would have been a colossal task that project restraints would not have allowed for. Also, the risk of vague political rhetoric would have undermined the effectiveness of the method. Therefore, I ascertained candidate positions by calculating the mean of all respondent perceptions. Based on this approach, the mean of respondent perceptions is widely accepted as an accurate depiction of where the candidate is most likely to stand on an issue. Consequently, the mean respondent reply was calculated for each candidate regarding each issue and identified as the position the candidate would adopt as his own.

The project demanded that several variables be created in order to supplement the survey data in a manner that would speak directly to the purposes of the project. Construction of the accuracy variable requires progression through several phases. The first establishes the distance between the respondents' interpretation of the candidates' positions and the candidates' positions, as represented by the mean of respondents' perceptions. The respondent's placement of each candidate on each issue is obtained directly from the survey data. The calculations of the candidates' mean positions are then subtracted from the respondents' placement of each candidate on each issue. The result of this formula provides a measure of how accurate respondents are in their perception of where candidates stand on the issues.

The ten variables that this computation has created have been identified as: 'accdcser', 'accrcser', 'accdcdef', 'accrcdef', 'accdcaid', 'accrcaid', 'accdcabr', 'accrcabr', 'accdcjob', and 'accrcjob'. The value of these variables is in their ability to illustrate to what degree the respondents correctly or incorrectly assess the candidates' positions. The exercise details numerical discrepancies that reveal whether respondents display substantial inaccuracies or only slight imprecisions.

The second step creates measures that represent a summary of the respondents' perceptions of accuracy across all five issues. This measure was created for each of the candidates. The formula for this measure consisted of adding together the accuracy variables for each candidate across the five issues to obtain an overall accuracy variable for each candidate. The variables that this computation has created have been identified as: 'accdc' and 'accrc'.

The two candidate accuracy measurements are combined in the third step as a means of capturing representative figures of how accurate respondents are about both candidates, on all five issues overall. The variable that this computation has created has been called 'accurate'. This variable represents the inclusive measurement of how accurate respondents' perceptions are with respect to the issue positions of Clinton and Dole. The final phase of the calculation is to compute the absolute value of the accuracy variable since the direction of the respondents' accuracy (or inaccuracy) level is unnecessary. The label for this value becomes 'absacc'. It serves as the primary foundational tool of the analysis. 'Absacc' is the dependent variable that will facilitate the analysis

of a variety of other variables that might possibly indicate patterns of correctness in perception. This accuracy variable produced values that ranged from .48 to 28.52, with values closer to zero indicating more accurate perceptions.

Issue Accuracy Analysis: Independent Variables

The media sources on which the project focuses are national television news broadcasts and newspaper publications. Each medium is commonly viewed as typically accessed instruments that are regularly utilized by substantial segments of the population. Both television and newspaper are widely distributed means of gathering information. This qualifies both media as useful tools because a reasonable majority of the electorate can be expected to have the access to them. Television use is restricted to questions concerning the viewing of national news broadcasts, since they are a major source of presidential campaign coverage. By eliminating questions that concern attention paid to local stations, large regional discrepancies as a result of the diversity in news programming that is locally motivated are avoided. There is no distinction made in this project between national and local newspapers. Newspaper use is not categorized in the American National Election Studies according to local or national use. It is generally acknowledged within the field of survey data that respondents use local newspapers. We presume, however, that local newspapers include reports on presidential campaigns and often reprint articles directly from national publications. Since the statistical figures in the survey are assumed to represent nationally distributed newspapers, the measurements

compiled from the survey data are also recognized as information pertaining to national newspaper readership.

Four independent variables representing media use were selected to be examined for their likelihood of exhibiting a significant relationship with the dependent variable. It is necessary to make some minor alternations in the style in which the responses to these questions are arranged. The first two independent variables were identified by questions that distinguish how many days per week the respondent watches national television news and how many days per week the respondent reads the newspaper. These questions were directly asked of the respondents and required no modifications in their style. These variables were renamed for easier identification. They have been labeled 'daystv' and 'daysnp'. The second two independent variables distinguish how much attention television viewers and newspaper readers pay specifically to campaign coverage. The ordinal scales of these two variables were not numerically consistent; therefore, it was necessary to reverse the response scale of the former so it correctly corresponded with the latter. The campaign attention variables were renamed as: 'tvcamp' and 'npcamp'. The role of these four independent variables is to incorporate media use into an analysis of degrees of accuracy. They have the ability to reveal whether national television news broadcasts and newspapers act as informative instruments that supply voters with helpful facts when making political decisions (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1.

Summary of Media Use Variables

(a) Frequency of Media Use		
# of Days Per Week	TV	NP
0	20.9%	25.0%
1	10.1	13.2
2	12.0	9.4
3	10.6	7.2
4	6.0	6.0
5	8.1	4.6
6	2.7	3.3
7	29.5	31.2
n	1712	1714
(b) Specific Attention Paid to Campaign in Media Use		
Attention Level	TV	NP
Very little	12.8%	5.5%
Some	23.0	11.4
Quite a bit	28.6	19.5
A great deal	12.7	6.8
n	1322	739

Issue Accuracy Analysis: Control Variables

An essential component of the analysis was the inclusion of a variety of control variables that also seem likely to predict accuracy. Because party identification is universally recognized as a major determining factor in voter choice, it is essential that this variable be included in the study. The project has approached vote choice from the perspective of issue position. However, the bearing of party identification on vote choice cannot be overlooked and therefore, the project will acknowledge its significance. The 1996 election survey included questions that differentiated between Democrat and Republican identification and

strength of identification with either party. This analysis uses the strength component of partisanship. Thus, the response categories were collapsed into a folded party identification variable. Respondents were then able to identify themselves as: 'independent', 'leaning partisan', 'weak partisan' or 'strong partisan'. Classifying the responses this way is more useful because it is of no interest in predicting accuracy to separate the results of particular party identifications. The resulting variable is labeled 'partyid'. Of the respondents, 8.5% identified themselves as 'independent', 24.3% identified themselves as 'leaning partisan', 34.5% identified themselves as 'weak partisan' and 31.7% identified themselves as 'strong partisans'. It is important to identify errors in accuracy across all political ideologies because any inability to correctly express ones preference in elections, regardless of ideological principles, is a hindrance to the implementation of democracy.

The remaining control variables that were selected for use in the investigation were retrieved directly from the survey questions. One of these was a summary description of the respondents' education. Of the respondents, 4.3% had completed 8 grades or less, 9.2% had completed 9-11 grades, 32% had completed high school, 17.9% had completed some college, 9.1% had received a community college level degree, 17.9% had received B.A. level degrees and 9.6% had received advanced degrees. An overall description of the education level of the respondents is incorporated into the study as a way of determining whether those who possess higher levels of education have an advantage in forming more accurate issue-based vote choices.

The third control variable is a measure of how much interest the respondent had in the presidential campaign. Respondents were asked to assign their own interest level a numerical value as a way to gauge whether they would have possessed a significant enough interest level to inspire attention to the campaign to begin with. Among the respondents, 27.2% claimed to be 'very much interested', 49.5% claimed to be 'somewhat interested' and 23.3% claimed to be 'not much interested'. This variable is an additional tool that can be utilized to determine whether initial interest level contributes to the accuracy of the voter's perception.

A fourth control variable is an assessment of the respondent's general level of information about politics and public affairs. Again, respondents were given an ordinal scale upon which to place themselves in regards to this question. Of the respondents, 13.1% expressed 'very high' interest, 26% expressed 'fairly high' interest, 35.3% expressed 'average' interest, 18.1% expressed 'fairly low' interest and 4.8% expressed 'very low' interest. The respondents' general level of political knowledge is a variable that could be viewed as a helpful indicator of the voters' capacity to cast "correct" ballots.

The fifth and sixth control variables are simply straightforward measures of the age and race of the respondent. The only modification made to the coding patterns of either one of these variables was to the response categories of the race question. Classifications of race had been broken down into a variety of categories in the original data. The response options were transformed to reflect only distinctions between white and non-white respondents. As a result,

responses of '0' signify white respondents while responses of '1' represent non-white respondents. The newly contrived race variable is called 'newrace'. Of the respondents, 84.8% were white and 14.6% were non-white. The ages of the respondents ranged from 18 to 93. These variables reflect a simple inquiry into whether a relationship exists between particular personal demographics and accuracy in issue-based vote choice. Previous research has shown that age and race may affect media use (Graber, 1997) and voting behavior (Abramson, Aldrich & Rohde, 1996).

The seventh control variable asks the respondent to reveal whether they had been contacted by any political party. Again, it is unnecessary to inquire as to which political party the respondent may have been contacted by. This contributes an interesting dynamic by discovering whether the respondents' choices may have been influenced by the direct persuasion of a party worker. Of the respondents, 26.1% were contacted by a political party and 63.2% were not. A substantial occurrence of this event in the pool of respondents may indicate that media power is marginalized by factors outside of its control.

Issue Accuracy: Regression Analyses

The variables listed above are put into use by running three regression analyses. The regression analyses demonstrate the relationship that exists between the dependent variables and the independent variables. The major objective is to determine how accurate issue-based vote choice is and whether any of the independent variables appear to cause consistent patterns of

fluctuation in that accuracy. Since media influence is the focal point of the project, it is in the two media use variables that the three regressions will differ. All three regressions will be performed with 'absacc' serving as the dependant variable, while alternating the media use variables as an attempt to isolate the effects that each may have. The first regression will include 'daystv' and 'daysnp' as the only media use variables. The second regression will include 'tvcamp' and 'npcamp' as the only media use variables. Finally, the third regression will include all media use variables. The regression analyses provide valuable statistical information that will demonstrate whether relationships of any significance exist between variables. Standards of significance for all three regression tables will be reported at .001, .01 and .05.

Issue Voting Analysis: Dependent Variable

Because the data that are relevant to the second phase of the analysis are directly available from the National Election Study, the compilation of the input variables is more straightforward than in the previous segment of the research. The second phase of the analysis does not require the construction of a dependent variable. The dependent variable utilized here is vote choice, which is directly retrieved from the survey data. However, since the project focus is limited to the two major party candidates, it is necessary to adjust the coding of the response categories. I recoded responses of '0' to denote a vote cast for Dole while '1' indicates a vote cast for Clinton. All other candidates receiving votes were recoded as missing data. The variable produced by this

reconfiguration of the vote choice response categories is entitled 'newvote'. Of the respondents, 42% claimed to have voted for Dole, while 58% claimed to have voted for Clinton. Vote choice serves as the dependent variable that will be examined against independent and control variables as a means of determining whether the issues themselves and issue accuracy have significant effects on vote choice.

Issue Voting Analysis: Independent Variable

There are two independent variables that have been utilized in this section of the research. The first is an issue distance measure. This model provides the first step in an important analysis of how respondents' political decisions are shaped by their own issue preferences. For the purposes of this project, such an issue distance measure indicates that the perceptions of the respondents are essential in understanding the conclusions they reach about presidential candidates. It provides an objective view of both accurate and inaccurate candidate perceptions. Respondents, however, will be likely to evaluate their own perceptions as accurate and therefore, useful in making political decisions. The issue distance measure exposes these discrepancies.

The issue distance measure is a calculation that determines the distance between the respondents' own positions on the issues and the respondents' perception of the candidates' positions on the issues. There are variables within the survey data that isolate each of these components. By subtracting the respondents' self-placements on each of the issues from the respondents'

perceptions of the candidates' placements on each of the issues, the distance that respondents believe separates them from candidates can be gauged. The ten variables that this computation has created have been identified as: 'issdcser', 'issrcser', 'issdcdef', 'issrcdef', 'issdcaid', 'issrcaid', 'issdcabr', 'issrcabr', 'issdcjob', and 'issrcjob'. This is an important step in relating the respondents to the candidates and discovering whether they consider their own positions to be similar to or different from those of the candidates.

The second computation required for the creation of the comprehensive issue distance measure combines the previous measure of individual issue distance for each candidate. Therefore, 'issdcser', 'issdcdef', 'issdcaid', 'issdcabr' and 'issdcjob' are added together to result in 'issdc'. Accordingly, the sum of 'issrcser', 'issrcdef', 'issrcaid', 'issrcabr', and 'issrcjob' produce 'issrc'. The variables generated by these calculations characterize issue distance measures over all five issues as they relate to each candidate individually. This supplies an estimate of how closely respondents perceive their own views to those of each candidate on the issues collectively considered.

Finally, the definitive issue distance measure is achieved by combining the previous assessments. Through the addition of 'issdc' and 'issrc', an overall issue distance measure is achieved that quantifies how closely respondents perceive their own views to those of both candidates taken as a whole on all five issues collectively. The final result of this computation is represented by 'issboth'. The range of issue distances spanned from -25 to 23. Values closer to -30 indicate respondents feeling extremely distant from Clinton, while those

closer to 30 indicate respondents feeling extremely distant from Dole. Values of zero indicate equidistant feelings from both candidates. This will serve as the indicator of whether overall issue distance measures are taken into account by the respondents when making presidential vote choices. The level of significance between the issue distance measure and vote choice will reveal whether an indicative relationship connects the two in a noteworthy fashion.

Issue Voting Analysis: Control Variables

Again, an essential component of the analysis was the inclusion of a variety of control variables that also exhibit a likelihood of predicting vote choice. This is a parallel dynamic to what was included in the first phase of analysis, with slight modifications in variable choice and response category coding. The first control variable included is party identification. Although party identification was also a part of the first regression analyses examining accuracy, the format of the respondent choice categories do not correspond with one another. For the second phase of analysis, it was necessary to use an unfolded standard of party identification. The survey data addressed the party identification of the respondents as a question that differentiated between Democrat and Republican identification. Because vote choice is a dichotomous variable between two presidential candidates that are each specifically affiliated with one of the political parties, it is necessary to retain the direction as well as the strength of identification. Of the respondents, 19.4% identified as 'strong Democrat', 19.7% identified as 'weak Democrat', 13.7% identified as 'Independent leaning

Democrat', 8.5% identified as 'pure Independent', 10.8% identified as 'Independent leaning Republican', 15.2% identified as 'weak Republican', 12.6% identified as 'strong Republican'. Unfolded party identification is useful in establishing whether a respondent's affiliation contributes to his vote choice.

The final four control variables introduced into the equation are demographic elements that present the possibility of shaping the political choices made by voters in presidential elections. The first of these is 'newrace', which had been previously recoded from the original survey data to differentiate only between white and non-white respondents, rather than incorporating an entire range of racial identifications. This model is preserved throughout the issue voting phase of analysis. The remaining demographic control variables are gender, income and age. Of the respondents, 44.8% were male and 55.2% were female. Income levels were reported with 12.7% earning '\$9,999 or less', 17.3% earning 'between \$10,000 and \$19,999', 14.3% earning 'between \$20,000 and \$29,999', 25.1% earning 'between \$30,000 and \$49,999' and 30.6% earning '\$50,000 and over'. Age frequencies remain the same as previously discussed. The importance of including these measures is to acknowledge that they may have substantial influence over vote choice and therefore, their effects must be taken into consideration.

Issue Voting: Logistic Regression Analyses

The variables discussed above are utilized by performing two logistic regression analyses. The benefit of using logistic regression analyses in this

phase of the research is to provide an estimate of probabilities. However, the probabilities they produce are nonlinear, which requires that the “*magnitude* of a coefficient must always be assessed in relationship to a particular point on the probability distribution, i.e., with all explanatory variables set equal to particular values” (Huckfeldt, 1984, 404). To state this another way, the logistic regression analyses observe the relationship between a single independent variable and the dependent variable while controlling for the inconsistency that occurs among the other variables. Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) pointed out that “the coefficient is an estimate of the amount of change on the cumulative standard normal distribution that would result from a change in one unit in the independent variable with the other variables held constant” (pp. 122-123). The result is a more in-depth investigation of the relative interaction between the variables.

There are two major objectives of the logistic regression analyses. The first is to determine whether the respondents’ perceived issue distances between themselves and the candidates is taken into account when they make presidential vote choices. This logistic regression analysis places vote choice as the dependent variable (‘newvote’), issue distance as the independent variable (‘issboth’) and party identification, race (‘newrace’), gender, income and age as control variables, as previously discussed.

The second goal is to assess the nature of the relationship between levels of accuracy and likelihood of taking issues account when deciding which presidential candidate to vote for. This logistic regression analysis requires the use of an interactive term to accomplish its task. The interactive term is a

measure that combines level of accuracy and issue distance. It determines whether those respondents who are more accurate in their issue perceptions of candidates are more likely to take these issue distance measures into account when making vote choices than respondents who are less accurate. The interactive term is produced by multiplying the pertinent variables. Therefore, the comprehensive issue distance measure ('issboth') is multiplied by the final accuracy measure ('absacc'). The result is an interactive term labeled 'accissue'. The standards of significance for both logistic regression tables will be reported at .001, .01, .05 and .07.

Chapter IV

Issue Accuracy Analysis

The first phase of analysis is conducted for the purpose of being able to ascertain the relationship that exists between media use and accuracy in respondents' perceptions of candidate position. In order to accomplish this task, three regression analyses have been carried out. The regression analyses incorporate the national television news and newspaper use variables as a means of connecting accuracy to media impact. They also incorporate a variety of demographic variables that I expected to have an influence on how accurately voters perceive the viewpoints of presidential candidates. It is anticipated that media use would not be significantly related to accuracy of candidate perceptions because the media is not expected to directly supply respondents with information that causes their assessments to be more precise. The results of the regression analyses reveal a variety of findings, some of which were expected, as well as others that were unforeseen. Nonetheless, the conclusions that have been generated by the research expose the lack of media influence on the formulation of accurate presidential candidate assessments by American voters.

The first regression analysis includes the media usage variables that pertain to the number of days that the respondents watched the national television news and read the newspaper in the last week. The second

regression analysis includes the media usage variables that questioned respondents specifically about whether they paid particular attention to campaign news on national television or in the newspaper. The third regression analysis observes how the patterns are affected when both sets of media usage variables are included simultaneously.

Insignificant: Frequency of Media Use and Attention Paid to Campaigns

The basis of this project is to examine the effect that issues have on vote choice and the role played by the media in accurately informing American voters during presidential campaigns. For this reason, it is important to examine the outcome of the media variables within the regression analyses. Clearly, the media variables do not show any relationship of significance with how accurate respondents are in their assessments of candidates.

In the first analysis, observing the number of days within the last week that respondents watched national television news and read newspapers reveals that both media are unable to exert any effect on the respondents' ability to be accurate about candidates (see Figure 4.1). The frequency of watching national television news has a significance level of .321. The regularity of reading newspapers registers a significance level of .157. Both of these significance levels disclose the inability of any level of media use, particularly television and newspaper, to have an impact on respondent accuracy. Logical assumptions about media use would presume that increased levels of media consumption would be associated with higher incidences of accuracy in perceptions about

candidate positions on issues. However, based on the significance levels revealed in this analysis, this assumption is incorrect. In reality, what the research confirms is the notion that watching national television news and reading newspapers are not factors that contribute in any constructive way toward helping citizens become any better informed as voters.

Figure 4.1.

Impact of Media Use on Accuracy of Issue Perceptions

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Signif. Level
TV Days	.037	.035	.993	.321
NP Days	-.048	-.047	-1.418	.157
Education	-.160	-.093	-2.547	.011**
Interest	.077	.019	.528	.598
Information Level	.311	.109	2.845	.005***
Age	.026	.148	4.133	.000***
Race (non-white)	1.048	.125	3.988	.000***
Party Identification (folded)	-.071	-.023	-.728	.467
Contacted by Political Party	-.010	-.007	-.212	.832

Dependent Variable: Absolute Value of Accuracy Index (ABSACC)

R² = .081

*p ≤ .05 **p ≤ .01 ***p ≤ .001

In the second analysis, exploring specific attention paid to campaign news on national television broadcasts and in newspapers did not reveal results that were any more encouraging (see Figure 4.2). For example, watching national television news with the distinct intention of gathering information about the

campaign has a significance level of only .679. The effect of reading newspapers with the explicit purpose of learning about the campaign displayed a somewhat better level of significance at .125, but still falls short of even relaxed standards of statistical significance (e.g. $p \leq .10$).

Figure 4.2.

Impact of Campaign Attention on Accuracy of Issue Perceptions

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Signif. Level
TV Campaign	-.029	-.013	-.414	.679
NP Campaign	-.103	-.049	-1.536	.125
Education	-.163	-.090	-2.488	.013**
Interest	-.022	-.005	-.149	.881
Information Level	.347	.117	3.075	.002***
Age	.025	.139	4.278	.000***
Race (non-white)	1.199	.139	4.411	.000***
Party Identification (folded)	-.051	-.016	-.504	.615
Contacted by Political Party	-.026	-.002	-.052	.958

Dependent Variable: Absolute Value of Accuracy Index (ABSACC)

$R^2 = .082$

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

The implications of this pattern are surprising. What the research suggests is that despite any efforts made by American voters to seek out knowledge concerning presidential campaigns from these media sources, national television news broadcasts and newspaper publications still do not offer productive and enlightening information to viewers or readers. This finding is

quite alarming because it is a commonly accepted notion that national television news and newspapers can be utilized as tools to increase the electorate's ability to make relatively well-informed vote choices. If voters are unaware that their likelihood of making accurate evaluations of candidates' issue positions is not improved by paying attention to national campaign news on television and in newspapers, they are being led to believe that it is unnecessary for them to supplement their information gathering habits through other sources.

In the third analysis, including both the frequency of media use and particular attention to the campaign results in outcomes that are consistent with the previous two models (see Figure 4.3). The number of days a respondent watched national television news in the last week registers a significance level of .306, which is roughly equivalent to the probability of impact it exhibited in the first regression. The number of days a respondent read the newspaper in the last week bears even less of an effect than it had in the first regression, dropping to a significance level of .393 in this model. When studying the difference in effect of specific attention paid to campaigns in national television news broadcasts or newspaper, the results remain overwhelmingly insignificant. Attention to national television campaign news yields a significance level of .744 in this regression. Correspondingly, attention to newspaper campaign news generates a significance level of .352 when all media variables are included in the analysis. The importance of this final regression analysis is to confirm that the findings presented in the first two models remain reliably constant. As the

previous discussion has unveiled, the results are maintained throughout the entirety of the study.

Figure 4.3.

Impact of Media Use & Campaign Attention on Accuracy of Issue Perceptions

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Signif. Level
TV Days	.040	.038	1.024	.306
NP Days	-.032	-.032	-.854	.393
TV Campaign	-.024	-.011	-.327	.744
NP Campaign	-.067	-.033	-.932	.352
Education	-.154	-.089	-2.429	.015**
Interest	.074	.019	.493	.622
Information Level	.310	.109	2.827	.005***
Age	.025	.146	4.055	.000***
Race (non-white)	1.034	.124	3.926	.000***
Party Identification (folded)	-.072	-.023	-.733	.464
Contacted by Political Party	-.009	-.006	-.189	.850

Dependent Variable: Absolute Value of Accuracy Index (ABSACC)

R² = .082

*p ≤ .05 **p ≤ .01 ***p ≤ .001

Significant: Education, General Level of Information, Age and Race

All three regression analyses reveal results that are both consistent and robust. Of the eleven independent variables enlisted in the analyses, four displayed significant relationships with the dependent variable. Level of education, general level of information about politics and public affairs, age and

race all yielded significant effects on accuracy in respondents' perceptions of where candidates stand on issues. Education revealed significance levels that exceeded standards of .01 regardless of which media variables were included. Based on the coding patterns of the data, higher levels of education among respondents are unfailingly associated with their being more accurate when making candidate perceptions. In the analysis that examined the number of days respondents used national television and newspaper news in the last week, education was significant at a level of .011. When specifying whether respondents paid specific attention to campaign news on television and newspaper, education was significant at a level of .013. Finally, when both media variables were included within a single regression analysis, education was significant at a level of .015. These results bring to light the consistency with which education has an effect on the likelihood of respondents making more accurate judgments about the positions of candidates on issues.

The second variable of substantial consequence is the general level of information that the respondent possesses about politics and public affairs. This variable also demonstrated uniform effects throughout all three regression analyses. When taking into account the frequency with which respondents use national television and newspaper news generally over the previous week, level of information was considerably significant at a probability of .005. The analysis that included only particular attention paid to campaign coverage on television and newspaper discovered that general level of information had an even more significant level of .002. Lastly, the regression analysis that merged both media

variables, determined that general level of political information was significant at a level of .005. Again, the results of how the general level of information possessed by a respondent affects the accuracy variable are exceptionally constant. The relationship between these two variables is a positive one. Based on the coding patterns of the data, this signifies that high levels of interest are associated with greater levels of accuracy. The findings exhibit the important role that general levels of information about politics and public affairs plays in determining the ability of respondents to form accurate perceptions about candidates.

The third variable that emerged as noteworthy in influencing accuracy was age. Again, the results connected with age are consistent throughout all three regression analyses. In the regression that considered the number of days in the last week that respondents used national television and newspaper news, age was remarkably significant at a level of .000. This pattern continued in the analysis that contained only the observation of those who devoted particular attention to national television and newspaper coverage of the campaign. The significance level revealed here was also .000. Finally, the analysis that included both media variables also illustrated the significance of age at a level of .000. These results are outstandingly uniform in a way that makes disputing the presence of age as a relevant factor in how accurately respondents perceive candidates very difficult. Interestingly, however, age and accuracy maintain a positive relationship throughout all three examinations. Based on the coding patterns of the data, this indicates that older respondents are less likely to

formulate accurate perceptions of where candidates stand on issues. I am unaware of other research that has found age to have a similar effect.

The final variable of significance is race. As with all of the preceding significant variables, the significance of race was unswerving throughout all three analyses. In the first analysis, which took the regularity of respondent use of national television and newspaper as news sources within the last week into account, race revealed an extraordinary level of significance at .000. Considering specific attention given to campaign news on television and newspaper by respondents, again, resulted in a significance level of .000 for the race variable. Conclusively, the final regression analysis which incorporated both media variables exhibited race as having a significance level of .000. The consistency with which race demonstrates an extraordinarily significant relationship with accuracy is undeniable. The direction of the correlation between the two is a positive one. Based on the coding patterns of the data, this denotes that non-white respondents are more likely to inaccurately perceive the candidate issue positions.

Discussion: Implications of Issue Accuracy

After examining the quantitative results that have been produced by the first phase of analysis, questions of their value and consequence remain unanswered. The importance of this stage of the research is manifested in its ability to connect the roles of demographics and media consumption to accuracy of respondent perceptions of candidate issue positions. What the research

indicates is that there are some variables that affect a voter's ability to correctly identify candidate viewpoints, but that the media are not appearing as one of those factors. These findings are central to the evaluation of issue-based vote choices that are developed throughout presidential election campaigns. Because media outlets are commonly viewed by the American public as viable sources of political information, the implications of these patterns are alarming.

Discussion: Demographics

The demographic variables that emerge as significant, by and large, adhere to the anticipated outcomes that were expected from the start of the project. Education, for example, demonstrated a logical relationship with the likelihood of accuracy among respondents. Respondents with higher levels of education are more likely to make more accurate assessments of presidential candidates than respondents with lower levels of education. This may be due in part to their ability to correctly interpret communications made by the candidates as well as the possibility that they have had gained exposure to the political arena through educational venues.

Another reasonable explanation for the increased likelihood that better educated respondents have more accurate perceptions of where candidates stand on issues could be rooted in the fact that they are more likely to supplement information-gathering through additional sources other than mainstream media. Better educated respondents have exhibited a greater

chance of being better informed about political matters (Mondack, 1995) and are as well as more likely to participate in politics (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993).

The second variable that demonstrates a significant relationship with accuracy is general level of information about politics and public affairs. Again, the connection it displays concurs with logical expectations about the interactive nature between the two. Having higher levels of general information about politics and public affairs strongly correlates with better chances of making more accurate candidate assessments. Naturally, commonsense would lead any rational thinker toward such a conclusion even before examining the results of the analysis. Without taking into account the source of the information, those who have higher levels of general awareness about the subject will be more likely to have accurate perceptions of the candidates because they will have a broader knowledge-base from which to make conclusions. Therefore, the relationship exhibited between general level of information and accuracy is fundamentally logical and inherently encouraging for the effectiveness of democratic procedures. When increased levels of knowledge about the subject indicate a positive shift toward accuracy, it conveys to political scientists that current democratic processes can be constructively improved by actively engaging more citizens in learning about it.

The third variable of significance introduces a more complex concern. Although, age has a significant relationship with accuracy, the direction of the correlation between the two is more puzzling than the previous effects discussed here. The connection between age and accuracy of candidate perceptions

indicates that older respondents are more likely than younger respondents to make inaccurate assessments about where candidates stand on issues. Upon initial consideration, it would seem a reasonable expectation that as voters get older, their knowledge base of candidates and political issues would expand and therefore cause them to be more accurate in their perceptions of both. The analysis, however, refutes this anticipation. The alarming dilemma that this presents for political scientists is the recognition that there is not a natural age-related pattern of progression toward increased familiarity with the political system. As a result, this suggests that there exists some flaw within the practice of information gathering that leads respondents to err increasingly as they get older.

Race is the final variable that is significantly related to accuracy. Unfortunately, despite a variety of important improvements to race relations, some evidence of stratification of racial groups continues to exist in the United States today. The link between race and accuracy denotes that non-whites are more likely to have inaccurate perceptions of issue positions held by candidates than whites. Causes for this phenomenon can be rooted in a variety of social structural explanations. One fundamental explanation might be that non-whites display tendencies of being less educated than whites, which has already been established as a key factor in predicting accuracy.

Another dynamic that might contribute to this occurrence could be increased feelings of alienation from the political arena among non-whites than exist among whites, as a whole. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) found that

blacks are less likely than whites to participate in political activities such as voting, contributing money, attending meetings, working for a candidate, signing petitions and writing letters. These trends are evidence of reluctance on the part of African Americans to be politically engaged. This reluctance is likely driven by lack of social mobilization that may permeate other non-white groups as well. Although the outcome of this aspect of the research demonstrates a recurrent defect that appears throughout American society, it also allows political science researchers to identify obstacles that hinder effective democratic practices. Barriers that differentiate between racial groups in determining accuracy appear as one of those obstacles in this case. Therefore, by isolating the basis upon which racial differences affect accuracy, democratic processes can be improved.

Discussion: Media Use

The media variables play a critical role in the project because they are the indicators that reveal whether national television news broadcasts and newspapers impose any effect on the accuracy of the perceptions that voters have of candidates. The insignificance of the media variables uncovers their lack of impact on the respondents' ability to correctly interpret candidate issue positions.

To begin with the broader measure of media impact, gauging how often the respondents watch national television news broadcasts and read newspapers within a week, exposes the irrelevance of basic universal use of both media. Respondents are not found to receive any benefit from simply being subjected to

national television news broadcasts and newspaper articles with more frequency. What makes this finding so remarkable is that it reveals common usage of television and newspaper as benign within the context of imparting political knowledge to people who are regularly exposed to them. The consequence is that many people may believe that they are receiving useful information when, in reality, they are not. This outcome puts American democratic effectiveness at risk by compromising the voters' ability to respond appropriately in the political arena. In other words, voters may not seek alternative avenues of gathering information if they are unaware of the fact that television and newspaper are failing to provide them with helpful messages.

The second media variables, which are more narrow in scope than the first, do not produce results that are any more inspiring. Paying particular attention to campaign news on national television broadcasts and in newspapers fails to exert a statistically significant impact on accuracy. Therefore, when voters specifically seek out information about presidential campaigns through these mainstream media vehicles, they still fail to acquire any constructive guidance in making accurate judgments about candidate issue positions. The implication of this pattern is that even when media consumers make deliberate efforts to obtain information about campaigns from national television news broadcasts and newspapers, they are unsuccessful in fulfilling such needs. Again, the failure of the media to provide useful input into the formation of accurate perceptions by individuals diminishes the effectiveness of democratic procedures in the United States. Many voters will not even be conscious of the

fact that they are not receiving the informative assessments of candidates that they are actively seeking. They will simply make issue-based vote choices on what they believe to be accurate assessments. For many others, voters may feel confused and alienated by national television news broadcasts and newspapers, actually realizing that they are not able to obtain useful, decisive facts that help them make decisions. This inability to gather helpful information through mainstream media sources, whether unconsciously or consciously, will leave democratic outcomes distorted by inaccurate perceptions of candidate issue positions.

Chapter V

Issue Based Vote Choice Analysis

The second phase of analysis is conducted with the purpose of determining whether there is a connection between issue distance perceptions and the vote choices cast by respondents. The dependent variable, respondents' vote choice, is examined within the context of five independent variables. These include an unfolded assessment of party identification, race, gender, income, age and an overall measure of issue distance between the respondents' and their perceptions of the candidates. The technique utilized to accomplish this objective is a logistic regression analysis. The advantage of performing the logistic regression analysis is that it scrutinizes the effect a single independent variable has on the dependent variable while taking into account the fact that the influence of the other independent variables will fluctuate. Logistic regression analysis provides a more appropriate means of estimating effect when the dependent variable is dichotomous (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980).

Significant: Issue Distance and Party Identification

Once the logistic regression is carried out, it reveals a variety of interesting findings. The initial analysis discloses which of the independent variables have a significant relationship with dependent variable. Only two of the variables can be

discussed as doing so (see Figure 5.1). The first variable that has a statistically significant effect is the issue distance measure. It is a central component of the project and operates as an effective means toward determining what role issue positions and perceptions play. The issue distance variable reveals a significance level of .064. Although this degree of significance is not as strong as commonly used standards might require, the fact that it only slightly exceeds the standard of significance indicates that issue distance has a noteworthy influence over which candidate respondents will vote for. In addition, when examining vote choice, any respondents who indicate that they did not vote are lost from the sample. This implies that had the sample been larger, the significance level of issue distance would have been highly likely to have easily exceeded .05. Consequently, the significance level of issue distance suggests that respondents do have a tendency to consider issue distances between their own views and those of the candidates when making electoral decisions.

The second variable that illustrates a high probability of influencing vote choice is party identification. The direction of the relationship between party identification and vote choice follows the expected pattern. It has a significance level of .000, indicating that party identification is relevant to determining how respondents will vote. This finding is consistent with the established literature within the field. Evidence has repeatedly revealed that voters are highly likely to make vote choices that are largely determined by party affiliations. Party identification also registers in this project as an unfailing dynamic that is involved in decisions about how to vote in presidential elections. Affiliation with a

particular party displays a negative relationship with vote choice. Based on the coding patterns of the data, this indicates that stronger tendencies toward being a Democrat are associated with a higher likelihood of casting votes for Clinton. This is obviously an effect that would have been expected.

Figure 5.1.

Impact of Issue Distance Perceptions on Presidential Vote Choice

Variable	B	S.E.	Significance Level
Issue Distance	.025	.025	.064*
Party Identification (unfolded)	-1.004	.076	.000****
Race (non-white)	.755	.570	.185
Gender (female)	.240	.285	.399
Income	-.031	.028	.259
Age	-.008	.009	.413

Dependent Variable: Major Party Vote (NEVVOTE)

*p ≤ .07 **p ≤ .05 ***p ≤ .01 ****p ≤ .001

Insignificant: Race, Gender, Income and Age

The remaining control variables included in the logistic regression failed to reveal any significant relationships with vote choice and it is useful to comment briefly on each of these variables. The first insignificant control variable is race, which fails to satisfy standards of significance by registering a level of .185. The second inconsequential control variable is gender, which is highly insignificant with a significance level of .399. The third irrelevant control variable is income,

which only reveals a significance level of .259. Finally, the fourth unrelated control variable is age, which has the highest level of insignificance at .413. What these patterns indicate are that race, gender, income age are unrelated to vote choice. Their insignificant relationships with vote choice suggest that they do not serve as accurate predictors in determining how respondents will vote.

Linear regression and logistic regression analyses similarly translate the beta coefficient. However, in a logistic regression, any change in the dependent variable reflects a direct proportion of the chance of two probabilities (Lien, 1998). Therefore, the beta coefficients are translated into probabilities using mathematical calculations. These calculations utilize a standardized formula that takes a consistent value of each control variable and its corresponding coefficient into account. For example, it is useful to determine the minimum, maximum and mean values that are associated with the issue distance measure as it is related to vote choice. By performing three calculations (each of which inserts one of the abovementioned statistical values) that take into account the respective coefficient, descriptive statistics are produced that reveal the probabilities associated with issue distance and voting for Clinton. Employing the same methods but incorporating the response values associated with strong Republican identification, strong Democratic identification and pure Independent identification will reveal the probabilities associated with party identification and voting for Clinton. It is expected that respondents who perceive their own views on issues as distant from Clinton's will be less likely to vote for him. Accordingly, it is expected that respondents who perceive themselves as being strongly

Republican will also be less likely to vote for Clinton than both pure Independents and strong Democrats.

There is a 48 percentage point difference between those who perceive their own opinions as very different from Clinton's and those who perceive their own opinions as very different from Dole's. The consequence of this gap is that people who feel their own positions to be detached from either one of the candidates will experience a substantial likelihood of allowing that distance to influence their decision. The respondents placed at either extreme will feel substantially different from one another and most likely cast opposing votes. This reinforces the notion that issues are significantly related to vote choice and will have a considerable impact on political decisions made by respondents. In addition, when considering party identification in analyzing which of the candidates a respondent is more likely to vote for, foreseeable patterns were produced. Those respondents who identified themselves as strong Democrats exhibit a 96 percent likelihood of voting for Clinton. Alternatively, those respondents who identified themselves as strong Republicans exhibit only a 6 percent likelihood of voting for Clinton. Finally, those respondents who identified themselves as pure independents exhibit a 57 percent likelihood of voting for Clinton. The comprehensive variation between the extreme ends of vote probability reveals the powerful influence that party identification has on voters. Because there is a 90 percentage point difference between the probabilities of strong Democrats and strong Republicans, the analysis exemplifies the unquestionable strength of party identification in determining how an American

will vote. More than any other factor, respondents turn to party identification as a guide in choosing a presidential candidate.

Function of the Interactive Term

Determining whether issues are a major factor in the political decision-making process of American voters becomes especially important when examined within the context of the accuracy variable. To take issue distance and accuracy into account, it becomes necessary to include an interactive term. The function of the interactive term is to counteract the linearity of an ordinary least squares regression (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) presented a succinct explanation when they wrote that interaction terms "...allow the effect of one independent variable to vary with the value of another independent variable" (p. 122). The interactive term is a product of the overall measure of issue distance and the accuracy variable.

Lien (1998) pointed out that the interactive term allows us to observe how concurrent characteristics of the respondents relate to one another. This is useful because many variables are not mutually exclusive of one another. Respondents often simultaneously possess characteristics of several control variables that may interact with one another, as well as both exerting influence over the dependent variable. To state it another way, the interactive term used here investigates whether respondents who have more accurate perceptions of candidate positions on issues are more likely to take those issues into account when making vote choices. It is expected that the interactive term will not

demonstrate a significant relationship with presidential vote choice. Therefore, respondents who perceive candidate issue positions accurately are not anticipated to be any more likely to take issues into account when making vote choice decisions than respondents who perceive candidate issue positions inaccurately.

Discussion: Implications of Issue-Based Vote Choice

After completing an interpretive computation of the logistic regression analysis, meaningful conclusions can be derived. When considering issue distance measures as predictors of vote choice, important trends emerge. Respondents who find themselves to be within the group that perceives their own views on issues to be least like those of Clinton demonstrate only a 36 percent probability of voting for him. Respondents who find themselves to be within the group that perceives their own views on issues to be least like those of Dole demonstrate an 84 percent probability of voting for Clinton. Finally, respondents who find their own views on issues to be closely situated along the mean between each of the candidates demonstrate a 65 percent probability of voting for Clinton. Again, these patterns coincide with the expected results. Logical reasoning would suggest that respondents who perceive their own positions on issues to be distant from Clinton's positions will be less likely to vote for him in an election. Conversely, those who perceive their own positions on issues to be more distant from Dole's positions will be more inclined to vote for Clinton in an election.

It is interesting to note that those who are positioned centrally between the two candidates display a propensity toward voting for Clinton. This finding suggests that a majority of respondents who are not extreme in their distance from either candidate are taking alternative factors into account that are causing them to have a slight preference for Clinton. A viable explanation might be the strength of party identification in 1996. A study published by Paul R. Abramson, John H. Aldrich and David W. Rohde (2003) revealed that Democratic identification enjoyed a slim majority over Republican identification. Thirty-eight percent of respondents classified themselves as either strong or weak Democrats while only twenty-nine percent classified themselves as either strong or weak Republicans. Among Independents, those who identified themselves as leaning Democrat also slightly outnumbered those who identified themselves as leaning Republican; fourteen percent and twelve percent, respectively (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde, 2003). The tendency for middle ground respondents to vote for Clinton may be a reflection of this trend in party identification.

Discussion: Implications of the Interactive Term

An interactive term was introduced into the logistic regression as an instrument that would predict whether the extent of accuracy the respondents were able to achieve in their perceptions of candidates determined whether or not they would be more likely to take issues into account when making vote choices. The analysis displayed that there was not any indication the interactive

term has a significant effect on vote choice. The implications of this result are that respondents who have both accurate and inaccurate perceptions of candidates can be equally expected to take issues into account when deciding how to vote in presidential elections. This finding is consistent with the expectations that were originally anticipated.

The insignificance of the interactive term suggests that voters may be casting issue-based vote choices that do not appropriately correspond with their beliefs. Accuracy of respondent perceptions does not indicate any directional probability of taking issues into consideration when making vote choices. Therefore, many respondents are actively participating in presidential elections based on incorrect perceptions of where candidates stand on issues. The long-term outcome of this pattern implies that democratic processes in American presidential elections may not be as efficient as would be desired.

Discussion: Implications of Media Impact

The objective of this body of research is to link the role of the media to democratic procedures. The first phase of analysis was successful in explaining whether the media functioned as a tool that assisted voters in making accurate assessments about candidate issue positions. As previously discussed, the media failed to serve as a constructive mechanism in creating accurate perceptions of candidates issues positions among respondents. The second phase of analysis illustrates the nature of the relationship between accuracy and vote choice. By revealing the association between accuracy of respondent

perceptions and vote choice in presidential elections, this analysis finalized the closing stages of the research. Without conducting the logistic regression analyses there would have been no examination of the most definitive act of democratic procedure – voting. The conclusive evidence was obtained through connecting the information learned about the media and accuracy to voter behavior at the polls.

It was learned from this extensive investigation that the media fail continually, throughout the formation of political opinions by Americans, to provide voters with constructive data about candidates' issue positions. As a result, voters are unable to accurately conclude which candidates are most closely associated with their own interests and beliefs. Furthermore, citizens are largely unaware of the media's inability to provide them with substantive coverage. Therefore, voters participate in presidential elections under the impression that they are accurately informed and well-equipped to make proper political judgments about the candidates. The results of such a progression can prove hazardous to the effectiveness of a healthy democracy. The diminished ability of voters to successfully participate in presidential elections in a manner that is most consistent with their conscious intentions inhibits responsiveness and accountability in a democratic system. If voters are unconsciously casting erroneous votes based on inaccurate perceptions, their effective democratic expression is obstructed.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

The importance of American elections has been the founding principle of this project. Throughout the research, it has been acknowledged that elections are a central component of the democratic principles of the United States. Because it is impossible for most individuals to personally voice their opinions within a governmental forum, elections have become the alternative means of articulation. They serve as the most common instrument of expression for the majority of American citizens. The President of the United States has become the ultimate manifestation of elected American representation. Every four years many voters exercise the right to declare their choice in a presidential candidate. As a result, the operational value of elections can be identified as an integral component of American democracy.

There are a variety of factors that are considered by voters when making political decisions. For many voters, there is no one single dynamic that is the exclusive predictor of political decision making. Numerous influences are exerted from a range of sources. These can include direct impact from the political arena itself and internal impact from the fundamental belief systems of the voters. In addition, there is the possibility of an external impact from information sources that are believed to be nonpolitically affiliated. Each of the

factors that are presented to voters as worthy of consideration cause the study of voting behaviors in the United States to be very complex. Although the behavior of some voters is driven by a single, explicit overriding rationale, others are torn between several conflicting factors. This leads many voters to utilize complicated decision-making processes, resulting in very challenging research for political scientists. In this project I accepted that challenge and attempted to contribute to a better understanding of American voter activity.

Consequences: Overall Results

The project followed a progression of analyses that revealed important facts about the media, issue perceptions and vote choices. The initial regression analysis discovered that a significant relationship does not exist between the accuracy of respondent perceptions about candidate issue positions and media use. Therefore, the indication is that the media do not supply their consumers with constructive information. This leads me to the question what purpose the media actually serve within the political arena. Television and newspaper are both highly utilized as effective mechanisms of publicity by presidential candidates throughout campaigns. Correspondingly, many voters watch television news and read newspapers for the specific purpose of gathering useful political information. These trends imply that the media have become accepted as a legitimate venue of communication between candidates and voters. However, the fact that the analysis fails to demonstrate a level of significance for

either of the media variables suggests that television and newspaper have not succeeded in fulfilling this expectation.

The second analysis was an opportunity for the media to be exonerated from responsibility in having any enduring effect on political processes. This absolution of the media may have taken place if issues were found to be an insignificant factor in political decision making. After all, if issue distance perceptions were not an influential determinant of vote choice, then within the parameters of this project, there would be no political consequences of the media's inadequacy. However, since issue distance perceptions were found to be significantly related to presidential vote choice, the evidence revealed that the media's inability to inform voters extended beyond simply revealing an unsatisfactory performance. By failing to contribute to the development of accurate political assessments by viewers and readers, the media did not constructively foster effective democracy. The lack of substantive reporting by television and newspaper resulted in real consequences for the effectiveness of political practices.

The concluding element of analysis was conducted as the final measure of whether the media could be relieved from being assigned a significant amount of accountability for damaging political consequences. This was accomplished through the use of the aforementioned interactive term. The inclusion of the interactive term became necessary when it was revealed that both accurate and inaccurate issue distance measures were being taken into consideration by respondents when making vote choices. Again, if higher levels of accuracy were

associated with including issue distance perceptions in vote choices and lower levels of accuracy were not associated with including issue distance perceptions in vote choice, no significant political consequences of the media's inadequacy would have materialized. However, the insignificance of the interactive term indicated that no particular accuracy levels were associated with the tendency to take issue distance perceptions into account. The outcome is that the shortcomings that were identified in the media, ultimately, wield influence on the political effectiveness of American democracy.

The results of the project revealed evidence that was consistent with all three of the originally stated hypotheses. The first hypothesis expected that observations would reveal the media as an insignificant factor in the formation of accurate political perceptions by respondents. This expectation was firmly reinforced by the first regression analysis. The second hypothesis expected that issue distance perceptions, generally, held by respondents have a direct impact on presidential vote choices made by them. This expectation was substantiated by the information conveyed in the second regression analysis. The final hypothesis expected the analysis of the interactive term to reveal that both accurate and inaccurate respondent perceptions, particularly, would be taken into consideration when making political decisions. Therefore, a significant amount of inaccurate assessments would be used as the justification for vote choices made by respondents. This expectation was vigorously confirmed by the introduction of the interactive term in to the second regression analysis.

The comprehensive implications of this progression of analyses are startling. Concerns arise over the detriment that can be caused to the democratic system upon which American ideals have been built. The notion of an inclusive democracy can be severely damaged by impediments to the informed formation of political attitudes. It is necessary that the structures put into place within the American democratic system successfully articulate the values and opinions of the electorate. Without the ability to accurately convey messages between the political arena and voters, the political direction of the nation is at risk of disorganized misguidance based on uninformed choices. In addition, if voters remain unaware that television and newspaper fail to supply them with productive knowledge, the development any effective change in media output will go unrealized. The result is that the effectiveness of American elections can be seriously compromised without a large portion of the population being aware of it.

As Americans, we place great value in the freedoms that we exercise within our personal, professional and political lives. However, citizens of the United States must become aware of the dangerous possibility that we can easily begin to take those freedoms for granted. Voters in the United States must first acknowledge the failure of television and newspaper to supply them with beneficial information. The electorate deserves to be made aware of the faults of the media upon which they have become so reliant. In order to effectively exercise democratic principles, Americans must continue to examine political communication with intense scrutiny and demand functional sources of

information. Inadequate media sources will only become responsive to the American electorate if it is required of them. Beyond acknowledgement of the dilemma, persuasive initiatives must be taken in order to compel the media to reevaluate the execution of their objectives.

Further Research Opportunities

Perhaps there exists a gap in the interpretation of the role of the media that has led to differing views of how they should function. This project has not questioned survey respondents or media production personnel about what the expected role of the media is. There is a possibility that discrepancies may be present between what voters presume to be gathering from media coverage and what media personnel believe themselves to be responsible for providing. Whether an extensive difference separates voter interpretation of the role of the media and the media's interpretation of itself would reveal an important element of the dilemma presented here. Voters may rely heavily on media input when making political decisions; however, the media may not be responding to such an elevated sense of responsibility. Clarity between the objectives that voters are hoping to accomplish by watching television news broadcasts and reading newspaper articles and the objectives that media channels are aiming to achieve by their distribution of information would facilitate a more operative system of communication exchange.

Beyond the problematic use of television and newspapers by voters as constructive sources of political knowledge, alternative aspects of information

gathering must be examined. Party identification undeniably had the most significant influence over vote choice. This has been established repeatedly in other research, but reasons behind this pattern need to be further scrutinized. It is important to understand whether voters continually use party identification as a default determinant for vote choice because they are not receiving substantive data elsewhere that may challenge the strength of party loyalty. Many Americans are strongly connected to political parties and their likelihood of voting along partisan lines would not be altered even if the media was found to provide highly informative reporting. The task of determining whether the American political processes can be effectively improved is crucial to the health of democracy in the United States. This project has discovered that a considerable flaw exists within the communication techniques utilized by the political arena and American voters. If the democratic principles of freedom and plurality are to be upheld within the United States, further inquiry into the dilemma revealed by this project deserves significant deliberation.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME: Kristine M. O'Toole

ADDRESS: 642 Amherst Place
Louisville, Kentucky 40223

DOB: Cincinnati, Ohio – March 30, 1976

EDUCATION

& TRAINING: B.S., Political Science
Ohio University
1994-1998

M.A., Political Science
University of Louisville
2002-2003